



**Veterans Health
Administration**
VA NEBRASKA-WESTERN IOWA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

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NEWS RELEASE

Letter to the Editor

***Mr. B. Don Burman,
Executive Director,
VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System***

OMAHA, Neb. -- More than 15 months have passed since our nation began its fight against COVID-19. We've prevented infections, cared for the sick, saved lives and mourned those we've lost. We've provided so much more than medicine during this time as loved ones supported from a distance. The burdens and responsibilities of the pandemic have strained organizations, families, and each of us in very personal ways. Now, as more than 2.3 million Veterans across the nation have been fully vaccinated, including more than 31,000 Veterans, Veterans spouses and Veteran caregivers in Nebraska and Western Iowa, trust and confidence in VA health care is at an all-time high.

Our health care teams throughout VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System have earned that trust, working on the frontlines to provide care to those most in need. We began implementing safety measures at our VA medical centers in Omaha and Grand Island, as well as at our community-based outpatient clinics in Lincoln, Bellevue, Shenandoah (Iowa), Norfolk, Holdrege and North Platte over a year ago to protect Veterans and our staff from getting sick. As part of prioritizing safety, for each appointment we've had to weigh the options and risks with our patients. When clinical urgency rose above the risk of COVID-19, we provided in-person care. When it did not and the risk of COVID-19 infection took priority, we offered alternatives. This was the right decision. In many cases, Veterans told us they preferred postponing routine care because they did not want to risk being exposed to the virus and we worked with them to identify next steps.

We successfully moved many appointments to video and telephone when that was appropriate and helped meet the needs of the patient. This has even offered unexpected benefits of convenience for Veterans or additional engagement options for family and caregivers. Unlike with in-person care, virtual options give a Veteran's support network the ability to join visits and engage with VA providers much more easily. We anticipate continuing to offer virtual visits even as we return to more in person care.

As we move forward, we are welcoming Veterans back in record numbers. We are encouraging Veterans to call first and talk to their health care team about coming in for routine and preventative care. These appointments, from cancer screenings to eye exams are essential to staying healthy and ultimately save lives.

Here at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, we have reached out to patients to be sure they are getting the care they need and working with them to reschedule appointments. As our

community spread of COVID-19 has decreased over the past few months, many have already resumed their care, while others have begun scheduling appointments for the weeks ahead, either within the VA or when eligible, in the community.

In working to coordinate care, we have found that many community providers outside of VA are also needing to reschedule previously cancelled appointments or are managing abbreviated schedules, creating longer wait times than usual and often longer than within VA. VA has provided more than 2.3 million Veterans care in the community since the MISSION Act was implemented almost two years ago, and we are proud that so many Veterans continue to choose VA, allowing us to coordinate timely, quality and patient-focused care inside or outside our walls.

I want this community to know that your VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System is dedicated to caring for Veterans, not just in this time of national emergency, but continuing now and into the future. While we are part of the national healthcare system, first and foremost, we are members of this vibrant community. VA NWIHCS employees are here day and night for those who have served our nation and call Nebraska and Western Iowa home. This includes opening our first Express Care Clinic at the Omaha VA Medical Center so that those Veterans who are experiencing non-emergent care issues can receive the care they deserve in a timely and efficient manner.

Recent legislation has enabled us to open up vaccination clinics to any Veteran along with their spouse or caregiver, and we are pleased to be meeting new members of this community for the first time, or welcoming back those who we haven't seen in a while. We would encourage every Veteran to consider coming in and receiving their COVID-19 vaccine and enrolling in care with us. If you or a Veteran in your life haven't come in for care in a while, please check in with your provider team and consider scheduling an appointment. If you know a Veteran who isn't enrolled in VA health care and is interested in their eligibility, please direct them to www.nebraska.va.gov.

I hope Veterans and all members of the community will take the time to work with their medical provider team to get their appointments rescheduled, even if they haven't been vaccinated yet. Our doors are open, and we look forward to seeing you soon.

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Public Affairs Note: *Mr. B. Don Burman has served as the director of VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System since March 2015. He is retiring effective May 31, 2021.*